

Seattle's South Lake Union Neighborhood

Overview

On any given day in Seattle, 100,000 people or more could find themselves ensnared in the “Mercer Mess” on Mercer Street in South Lake Union (SLU), a neighborhood long notorious for its traffic gridlock among abandoned warehouses and vacant parking lots.

But SLU's reputation for congestion and bleak landscapes is rapidly changing as a result of the City of Seattle's leadership in coordinating investments in transportation, affordable housing, and green space. In a remarkably short period of time, a wave of mixed-use and commercial development in SLU has transformed the once isolated industrial area into a vibrant, livable neighborhood with significant economic benefits.

- Since development began accelerating in 2004, SLU has added **\$1.1 billion in newly constructed** buildings (including enough office and biotech space for more than 13,000 employees), **and produced \$4.8 million a year in additional tax revenue** for the City of Seattle.¹
- A total of **4.2 million square feet of non-retail commercial space** was constructed between 2000 and 2010.²
- Permanent jobs in the neighborhood have increased by 56% since 2002.³
- Approximately one-third of SLU's **housing remains affordable** among a highly desirable stock of new and luxury housing options.⁴

To replicate this scale of community revitalization throughout the nation, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) joined together in June 2009 to help communities nationwide improve access to affordable housing, increase transportation options, and lower transportation costs while protecting the environment. The [Partnership for Sustainable Communities](#) (PSC) works to coordinate Federal housing, transportation, water, and other infrastructure investments to make neighborhoods more prosperous, allow people to live closer to jobs, save households time and money, and reduce pollution. The Partnership agencies incorporate six principles of livability into Federal funding programs and policies to support locally developed projects.

The city's commitment to SLU in the form of plans and early investments was a key to building confidence for private development. In addition to securing land for new park space, the city also adopted a neighborhood transportation plan,

The Partnership agencies incorporate six principles of livability into Federal funding programs, policies, and future legislative proposals to support locally developed projects:

- Provide more transportation choices;
- Promote equitable, affordable housing;
- Enhance economic competitiveness;
- Support existing communities;
- Coordinate policies and leverage investment; and
- Value communities and neighborhoods.

which identified fixing the “Mercer mess” and improving neighborhood transit as top priorities. According to Phil Fujii, Public Policy Specialist at Vulcan Inc. (Vulcan), a major landowner and developer in SLU, “If there was no assurance that [the Mercer Corridor project] would happen, I’m not sure what the development trajectory would have been in the area.”⁵ Without improved traffic circulation and safe places to walk and bicycle, the potential for adjacent commercial or institutional development would be stifled.⁶ Federal investment supported these essential transportation projects as well as other neighborhood infrastructure, such as housing and park space, leading towards a more vibrant, urban SLU.

Setting the Stage for Redevelopment

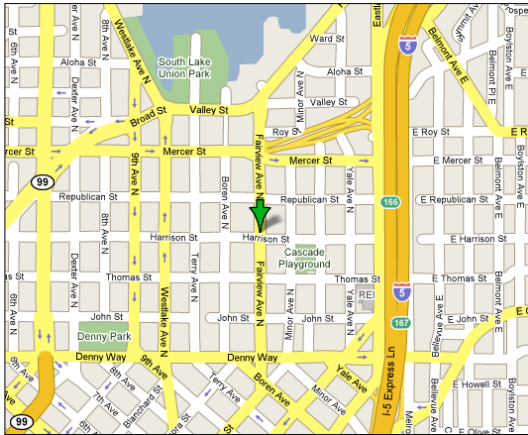


Figure 1: A map of the South Lake Union neighborhood in Seattle, bordered by Interstate 5 to the east, Aurora Avenue/Route 99 to the west. [Source: Google Maps]

Over the past 50 years, plans for SLU reflected shifting priorities for the area. In the 1950s, the city planned to construct an elevated highway, the “Bay Freeway,” to connect Highway 99 in downtown with I-5, east of South Lake Union. The freeway route would have left much of the neighborhood, lakefront, and Mercer Street under a concrete shadow and inaccessible to residents. The city moved forward with the project and acquired large tracts of land in the area until a 1972 voter referendum finally scuttled the controversial plan.

After the referendum, the freeway land remained in city ownership; no new large-scale plans materialized for the neighborhood for the next two decades.^{7,8} During this time of relative inactivity, local community development corporations (CDCs) took advantage of low property values and began developing affordable housing and homeless supportive services, particularly in the historic Cascade area of South Lake Union. After a proposal

for a large, 61-acre greenway (the “Seattle Commons”) failed by voter referendum in the mid-1990s, the city began to sell off its excess parcels to encourage new development in the area.⁹ One buyer was Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft, who over the next several years acquired close to 60 acres in SLU for his development company, Vulcan.¹⁰

During this time the Mercer Corridor remained as the main east-west route connecting the central city with I-5. Originally intended as a temporary traffic solution, over the next several decades Mercer Street’s four one-way lanes and Valley Street’s two-way, four-lane expanse acquired numerous stop lights, confusing turning patterns, and deteriorating pavement. Despite Mercer Street’s unofficial role as the “Main Street” of SLU, pedestrians were left vulnerable due to lacking or nonexistent sidewalks, medians, and crosswalks as they navigated the 80,000 cars traveling the corridor every day. Cars and trucks exiting I-5 had to weave through several turns and intersections to move west towards downtown, often leaving traffic backed up onto interstate travel lanes.

In 1998, neighborhood residents and stakeholders organized the South Lake Union Planning Organization to identify potential solutions to the area’s biggest problems and “to end uncertainty” about the neighborhood’s future.¹¹ The

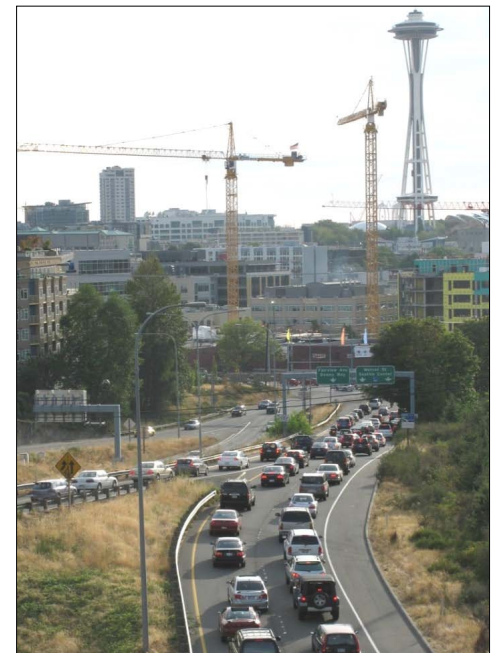


Figure 2: Cars backed up onto I-5 as they attempt to enter SLU. [Source: City of Seattle, 2010 TIGER grant application, page 18]

resulting South Lake Union Neighborhood Plan identified three central issues: parks and open space, transportation, and neighborhood character. Top priorities included addressing congestion in the Mercer Corridor and converting excess U.S. Navy property on the lakefront into a new park. The infrastructure projects were intended to both improve quality of life and position the neighborhood – among the last in the city with room for growth – for redevelopment.^{12, 13}

Initial Investments Catalyze Development

Following the 1998 neighborhood plan, the city worked with the U.S. Navy in 2000 to acquire a five-acre lakefront parcel at a significantly reduced price.¹⁴ The city's local parks levy and private donations provided \$31 million to design the decaying Naval yard into an active urban park, which opened in 2010.¹⁵ The property also included an historic armory that would become the new home of the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI). The armory restoration was supported by \$5 million in Federal Historic Preservation Tax Credits administered through the National Park Service. This initial contribution to the neighborhood's open space and cultural amenities signaled that South Lake Union was moving on from "pass through" to "destination."



Figure 3: Rendering of Lake Union Park. [Source: City of Seattle, <http://www.seattle.gov/parks/proparks/projects/lakeunionpark.htm>]

In 2004, 32 neighborhood, business, and community groups contributed to the SLU Transportation Plan, which recommended a two-way boulevard for the Mercer Corridor. The plan was significant since the project would be the first in the city to implement a "complete streets" solution,¹⁶ an approach that focuses on equally accommodating all modes of travel. Though traffic studies estimated that automobile travel times for some segments of Mercer Street could increase,¹⁷ the benefit would be an estimated 80,000 more pedestrian, transit, or bicycle trips per day, an offset of car trips that by 2024 would lessen annual gas consumption by 10 million gallons.¹⁸

Because the city was proactive with a large amount of relatively contiguous parcels at the same time, there was increased opportunity to pursue public-private coordination on a large scale.

For example, the city's 2001 sale of excess freeway land to Vulcan for \$20.2 million carried a requirement that the developer provide 50 units of affordable housing in SLU; the deal also included a \$5 million contribution to Lake Union Park.^{19, 20} Anchor developments that moved to or expanded on Vulcan-owned land shortly after the purchase included the University of Washington School of Medicine's research labs, Seattle Biomedical Research Institute, and the Tommy Bahama headquarters. As early projects proved viable, the city came to share a vision with Vulcan for SLU to become a regional hub for the life sciences, technology and retail industries.²¹

In response, the city began to develop various incentives and policies to encourage development and shape improvements to SLU. Changes included zoning revisions to accommodate biotech buildings and mixed-use development, density bonuses for affordable housing, and designating SLU as an "urban center" in the city's 2004 comprehensive plan. These efforts were projected to help attract an additional 10,500 jobs and nearly to 3,000 residential units to the neighborhood by 2010.²² In fact, job growth exceeded that projection by 29 percent, and 87 percent of the projected housing units were built by 2010 despite the economic downturn.²³

Improving the Mobility, and Livability, of South Lake Union

To serve SLU's local mobility needs, the city began to pursue Seattle's first modern streetcar in 2004. Though the streetcar was primarily intended as a way to reconnect SLU to downtown,²⁴ businesses in SLU were also supportive because of the streetcar's potential to attract new development.²⁵ Indeed, the prospect of the streetcar encouraged Microsoft and Amazon.com to eventually locate in SLU, in part because they recognized its benefit to employees.²⁶



Figure 4: South Lake Union streetcar, near the Lake Union Park stop, 2012. [Source: Lilly Shoup, U.S. DOT]

SLU area businesses organized a Local Improvement District (LID) named "Build the Streetcar," raising \$25.7 million through a self-imposed levy. The city and State also contributed \$11.5 million for the \$52.1 million project.^{27, 28} Federal funding from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) (\$7.2 million from the Urbanized Area Formula (5307) Funding Program); the Federal Highway Administration (\$4.8 million in appropriations and \$1.3 million from the Surface Transportation Program); and King County Metro (\$1.6 million in FTA capital funding) closed the remaining gaps.²⁹

The 2.6-mile SLU streetcar loop opened in late 2007 with stops at area businesses and amenities such as the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and Lake Union Park. At its southern terminus the SLU streetcar connects to the Sound Transit Link Light Rail, which travels to the airport. Priority at traffic signals helps make the streetcar's route more efficient.³⁰

Since its opening, the streetcar has played a strong role in attracting investment to SLU. Within four blocks of the line, 3.3 million square feet of commercial space and 6,100 residential units have been built since the streetcar's initial approval in 2005.³¹ The streetcar contributes to greater foot traffic and street activity, which in turn support the businesses along the route.

The streetcar's success is evident in its popularity. Before it opened in 2008, daily ridership was projected at 1,000 users; ridership increased substantially when the first five buildings (600,000 square feet) of Amazon's 1.7 million square foot headquarters opened in 2010.



Figure 5: Design solution of the Mercer Corridor project, including existing development and the streetcar line. [Source: City of Seattle, 2010 TIGER grant application, page 5]



There are now approximately 3,000 daily riders.³² In 2011, employers in SLU contributed an extra \$65,000 to keep the streetcars operating at peak levels during the afternoon commute, a testament to the importance of the streetcar to businesses and their employees.³³ This private funding mechanism was so successful that employers recently committed another \$200,000 to extend the expanded service for two more years.³⁴

While the streetcar provided a new alternative to cars in SLU, congestion in the Mercer Corridor remained a problem. Improvements to the Mercer Corridor had been listed as a State priority since 1995, but the project was in constant competition with other large infrastructure projects, such as the Alaskan Viaduct Tunnel, for State and local funds. Despite this, the city managed to prepare for construction by completing project design and environmental reviews by 2009, and securing \$31.4 million in private funds. Still, a large funding gap kept the project on hold even as SLU's population continued to grow. The \$30 million U.S. DOT Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant for the \$161.5 million project was a critical factor that enabled the long-awaited project to finally move forward.

Construction on the Mercer Corridor began in 2010 and is scheduled for completion in 2013. The project includes crosswalks at 12 intersections, 32 block faces of improved and widened sidewalks, bicycle lanes, six blocks of multi-use trails, and the addition of 2.8 acres of landscaping and 269 trees.³⁵ Mercer Street will be widened to a six-lane boulevard to accommodate a landscaped median and new sidewalks, while Valley Street will be slimmed down to one lane in each direction with on-street parking, wide sidewalks, and bicycle lanes. To support further development, century-old utilities will also be replaced during construction.

Promoting Affordability and Sustainability

Locating housing in transit- and jobs-rich areas can benefit households by reducing transportation costs and commute times. The City of Seattle is proposing a [zoning change](#) in SLU that will incorporate strategic programs and incentives to maintain and increase affordable housing and attract new market-rate development. The proposed SLU residential density bonus program will allow developers in SLU to add height in exchange for either constructing affordable housing or paying \$19/square foot into an affordable housing development fund. Although the new zoning and bonus program have not yet been implemented, in 2008 the city allowed Vulcan to add height and density on two blocks in SLU in exchange for a contribution to the affordable housing development fund and other public benefits. Through this agreement, the Amazon.com campus development contributed \$5.7 million toward affordable housing and \$700,000 for day care in the city.³⁶



Figure 6: Canaday House at 420 Minor Avenue, South Lake Union.
[Source: <http://www.desc.org/canaday.html>]

Approximately \$2.3 million of Vulcan's density bonus funding will go towards the Williams House, an 84-unit apartment building for the chronically homeless.³⁷ HUD is contributing \$470,000 in [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act Care Homeless Assistance Program](#) funding to the building's support services for adults and veterans recovering from addiction. Additional new housing for the homeless in SLU is also provided through the [Canaday House](#), which opened in 2010 and contains 83 apartments for homeless adults with mental health and substance abuse issues. HUD funding supported the project through \$772,145 of [Community Development Block Grant](#) (CDBG) funds and \$640,926 in McKinney funding for treatment and services.

SLU is a strategic location to promote independent living for low-income seniors, given its increasingly pedestrian-friendly nature and access to transportation and services. [HUD's Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly Program](#) provided \$5.7 million to the local non-profit Low Income Housing Institute for the construction of The Bart Harvey development. Started at the height of the construction boom in 2006, the \$12.9 million, 49-unit project was able to carry on through the economic downturn with the combined support of Section 202 funding and \$6.7 million in Federal Low Income Housing Tax Credits.³⁸ The LEED Silver-certified Cascade Senior Housing also opened in 2009 and is located within three blocks of the streetcar and one block of a bus stop.

To support Seattle's leadership in green building and energy efficiency, in 2010 the U.S. Department of Energy awarded the city \$20 million through its [Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant's BetterBuildings](#) program. The funding supported the development of [Community Power Works](#), a city-wide pilot program to test new approaches to energy efficiency in all building sectors (residential, commercial, and institutional). Federal investment is supporting sustainability in SLU through additional projects that will have both neighborhood and regional impacts:

- The "Swale on Yale" is a \$10 million public-private green infrastructure project on Yale and Pontius Streets that will capture and filter 190 million gallons of currently untreated stormwater that annually flow into Lake Union. The swales will remove 25 cubic yards of sediments and pollutants per year (2.5 dump truck loads) from stormwater run-off.³⁹ A portion of funding for the \$10 million project comes from the State's [Clean Water State Revolving Fund Loan Program](#), which is funded in part by U.S. EPA. Planting areas and special underground diversion vaults will work to separate sediment from stormwater before it is released into Lake Union.
- U.S. EPA awarded the Puget Sound Regional Council a \$1 million [Watershed Management Assistance Program Grant](#) to develop Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) programs [among regional cities and counties](#), including Seattle and King County. Much like an [affordable housing TDR](#) program already in place in SLU, this program will allow SLU developers to increase density by purchasing development rights from landowners in rural areas of the county, thereby preserving farm and forestland. The City of Seattle recently incorporated the TDR program in its [proposed re-zoning legislation](#) for SLU.⁴⁰

Relationship to Partnership for Sustainable Communities Principles

SLU's revitalization demonstrates the positive outcomes that can be produced by strategic investments in infrastructure that promote economic development and improve quality of life. The efforts of the city, in coordination with its Federal and local partners, produced a range of benefits directly related to the Partnership's six principles, as outlined below.

Provide More Transportation Choices

- The SLU streetcar is the first completed leg of a plan for a larger streetcar system running throughout Seattle. The city recently received a \$900,000 planning grant from FTA to consider options to connect the SLU streetcar with all three of Seattle's multi-modal transit hubs, including downtown.⁴¹
- The City of Seattle estimates bicycle improvements on the Mercer Corridor project will provide a quantified health benefit of \$6.6 million."⁴²



Promote Equitable, Affordable Housing

- A network of community development organizations and city, State, and Federal programs has helped to maintain affordability in SLU. Nearly 2,400 housing units were added from 1990 to 2010,⁴³ approximately 30 percent of which were below market-rate.⁴⁴
- With the support of Federal investment, numerous units for homeless individuals, including veterans and seniors, have been developed in South Lake Union. The mixed-income neighborhood includes some of the community's most vulnerable individuals living among moderate and upscale development.

Enhance Economic Competitiveness

- Supported by \$14.9 million in Federal investment, the SLU streetcar helped leverage the five-building, 1,702,694-square foot Amazon.com campus, bringing in approximately 10,000 employees to the neighborhood. In recognition of the importance of the SLU streetcar to their business, major employers in SLU renewed paying for increased service during rush hour after a trial in 2011.⁴⁵
- New jobs in SLU, many of them high-paying, have outpaced projections with a net gain of more than 9,000 permanent jobs between 2002 and 2011, an increase of 56 percent.
- A total of 377,000 square feet of retail space and 4.2 million square feet of commercial space were developed in SLU between 2000 and 2010, allowing for vastly increased economic activity.⁴⁶
- Office space vacancy currently is under 5 percent in South Lake Union.⁴⁷

Supporting Existing Communities

- In just six years (2004-2010), the assessed property value of new construction in SLU increased by \$1.1 billion.⁴⁸
- In 2001 real estate taxes on development (excluding land) collected by the city on Vulcan-owned property totaled \$479,549. These same parcels generated \$5,248,228 in real estate taxes for the city in 2012.⁴⁹
- Jobs in high-paying computer, scientific, and technical services has increased by 10 percent since 1995, when only 5 percent of jobs in SLU fit that category. The overall number of jobs in SLU has increased from 14,570 in 1995 to 25,029 in 2011.⁵⁰



Figure 7: View overlooking the SLU neighborhood. [Source: http://www.seattle.gov/DPD/cms/groups/pan/@pan/@plan/@proj/documents/web_informational/dpdp022279.pdf]



- Between 2001 and 2011, \$156 million in cumulative new tax revenue was generated for the city by construction, sales, and other taxes in SLU. Of that, approximately 85 percent is from recurring revenue sources such as taxes from real estate, business and occupation, utilities, and retail sales.⁵¹

Coordinate Policies and Leverage Investment

- Proposed incentives to increase height and density in SLU – such as height bonuses for affordable housing preservation and land preservation – support policies adopted by city and regional plans to direct new development to existing areas. If passed, the TDR program developed in part with funding from U.S. EPA will help preserve 25,000 acres of outlying forest and farmland by transferring development rights to SLU.⁵²
- Commitment to redeveloping Mercer Corridor helped the city in fundraising for the development of Lake Union Park, since making Valley Street pedestrian-friendly was key to ensuring users had safe access to the lakefront open space and restored armory.⁵³
- The successful growth of SLU and the importance of the Mercer Corridor project to the region have leveraged an additional \$14 million TIGER IV grant for the new Mercer Corridor West project.⁵⁴

Summary

According to former Seattle Mayor Nickels at the time the SLU transportation plan was adopted in 2004, the Mercer Corridor project is the “crowning piece, along with the streetcar, in changing the neighborhood.”⁵⁵ Federal investment supported numerous elements that, when coordinated, built a vibrant urban neighborhood – diversity in housing and job options, choice in transportation modes, and access to green space and cultural institutions. Such investment enabled several of SLU’s key projects to move forward in time to capture development momentum and support a neighborhood that then grew to exceed all expectations. Indeed, reflecting on early skepticism about the city’s initial investments in SLU, in 2011 a prominent local journalist concluded, “It’s hard not to revisit those debates...and acknowledge that the investment has paid off.”⁵⁶

All images included in this document were drawn from publicly accessible sources, which are fully referenced below.

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